Tuesday, February 14, 2006

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #12 (SO12)
(Conflict Reduced in Mindanao and Other Areas Vulnerable to Violence)

E-centers link far-flung rural communities

Every day after school hours, students mill around the community e-center (CeC) in Upi, Maguindanao. For only P20, roughly equivalent to a 13-km jeepney fare, they can reach the farthest corners of the world or perhaps wander through the most popular tourist spots in Europe or the Caribbean islands.

For 15-year-old high school student Shamera Nasim, P20 is all it takes to "transport" her to Saudi Arabia. "I always finish my research work as fast as I can so I will have time to spare talking to my mom," said Ms. Nasim, whose mother is an overseas worker in the Middle East.

She has not seen her mother for two years, but with the e-center, P20 goes along way toward bridging the gap.

CeCs are facilities where, for a minimal fee, the public can access various information and communications technology services such as Web browsing, e-mail, voice and facsimile service.

These centers serve as community libraries, points of access to distance education, business service centers, local, regional and international news services centers, and portals for various government services.

The e-centers, which look like internet café cum business centers, have enriched the learning experience of students in the area who previously had access only to antiquated library materials.

They have also augmented the resources provided by US Agency for International Development (USAID) to two schools in Upi.

The Upi Agricultural School and Nuro Central Elementary School, respectively, received 10 and five internet-connected computers, bundled with useful peripherals, through the USAID's computer literacy and internet connection program. Selected teachers from these schools have likewise received computer skills training.

South Upi in Maguindanao is considered one of the underprivileged municipalities nationwide. Though even the basic necessities and standard infrastructure are lacking, the range of amenities to residents are expanding.

Upi is the site of the first CeC in the country. Launched in October 2004, it is a government-private sector partnership to provide fast communication services through facsimile and e-mail, as well as reduce phone bill costs by using the new local telephone system.

Most of the government employees in the area who previously had to travel to Cotabato City to have their documents processed by the Government Service Insurance System, can now apply for loans online.

Business people, who once had limited contact and little access to markets outside the municipality, can now arrange efficient domestic and overseas transactions through the CeC.

In fact, locally made baskets made by the indigenous Teduray tribe, are being sold internationally through the internet; product information on these baskets is posted in the local government unit's website.

Meanwhile in Malungon municipality, a predominantly rural community in Sarangani, technology has also been introduced.

Though only 23 of 31 barangays have access to power, an e-center. With the CeC, telecommunications companies such as Globe and Smart have entered the municipality.

E-centers were also established in equally remote municipalities in Mindanao such as Maitum and Malapatan in Sarangani, as well as Jolo in Sulu. — *Growth with Equity in Mindanao*

(Source: Business World, 2/14/06, page 6/S1)